



*dress to  
kill,  
fight to  
win*

*by dean spade*



Does it matter what I'm wearing, what I look like, how I wear my body? All our lives, we receive conflicting commands to ignore appearances and not judge books by covers, and to work incessantly to conform our appearances to rigid norms. The result, I think, is that as we come to reject and unlearn the ways we've been taught to view our bodies (fatphobia, racism, sexism, gender rigidity, consumerism, ableism) we become rightfully suspicious of appearance norms and fashions and seek to form resistant practices. But what should those resistant practices be?

I think sometimes being anti-fashion leads to a false notion that we can be in bodies that aren't modified, and that any intentional modification or decoration of your body is politically undesirable because it somehow buys into the pitfalls of reliance on appearances. This critique is true, lots of times what we mean to be resistant aesthetic practices become new regulatory regimes. Certain aspects of activist, queer, punk fashions have fallen victim to hierarchies of coolness that in the end revolve around judging people based on what they own, how their bodies are shaped, how they occupy a narrow gender category, etc. Perhaps it is inevitable that the systems in which we are so embroiled, which shape our very existence, should rear parts of their ugly heads even in our attempts at resistance. But does this mean we should give up resistant aesthetics? Isn't all activism imperfect, constantly under revision, and isn't that why we continue doing it? In my view, there is no "outside"-none of us can stand fully outside capitalism, racism, sexism and see what is going on. Instead we stand within, and are constituted by these practices and forces, and we form our resistance there, always having to struggle against forces within ourselves, correcting our blindspots, learning from one another. So of course, our aesthetic resistance should do the same.

More importantly, when we appeal to some notion of an unmodified or undecorated body, we participate in the adoption of a false neutrality. We pretend, in those moments, that there is a natural body or fashion, a way of dressing or wearing yourself that is not a product of culture. Norms always masquerade as non-choices, and when we suggest that for example, resisting sexism means everyone should look androgynous, or resisting racism means no one should modify the texture of their hair, we foreclose people's abilities to expose the workings of fucked up systems on their bodies as they see fit.

The example I'm always wrestling with is trans surgery. Countless people who purportedly share my feminist values have argued to me that rather than having my body modified, the proper course of action would be to come to view it differently, such that it was not in contravention to my internal gender picture. Sometimes folded into this argument is a notion that trans surgery is a part of the capitalist construction of dichotomous gender. Rigid binary gender serves capitalism by setting a norm of extreme masculinity and femininity that none of us can achieve, so that we must constantly try to buy our way out of the gender dysphoria we all feel. In extreme cases, the argument goes, trans people buy gender transition procedures in order to cure ourselves of the fundamentally political condition of gender dysphoria, and we therefore sell out our own resistance to the binary gender system. I wholeheartedly agree with most of this analysis, except for the part where trans people are selling out everyone's chances at gender resistance when we alter our bodies.

What this argument misses is twofold. First, there is no naturalized gendered body. All of our bodies are modified with regard to gender, whether we seek out surgery or take hormones or not. All of us engage in or have engaged in processes of gender body modification (diets, shaving, exercise regimes, clothing choices, vitamins, birth control, etc) that alter our bodies, just as we've all been subjected to gender related processes that altered our bodies (being fed differently because of our gender, being given or denied proper medical care because of our gender, using dangerous products that are on the market only because of their relationship to gender norms, etc). The isolating of only some of these processes for critique, while ignoring others, is a classic exercise in domination. To see trans body alteration as participating and furthering binary gender, to put trans people's gender practices under a microscope while maintaining blindness to more familiar and traditional, but no less active and important gender practices of non-trans people, is exactly what the transphobic medical establishment has always done. This is why trans people are required to go through years of bullshit proving and documenting ourselves in order to get gender-related procedures, while non-trans people can alter their gender presentation through normabiding chest or genital surgeries and hormones as quickly as they can hand over a credit card.

The second blindspot here is in the assumption that trans surgery has a single meaning. The harshness and rigidity with which we view each other's aesthetics of resistance—the ways that we decide that these practices have singular meanings—forecloses our abilities to truly engage each other's work. We have to constantly fight the temptation to so narrowly view each other's practices. Of course, it must be true that some trans people are sexist, some trans people believe strongly and want to enforce binary gender just like some non-trans people. But to pre-determine that there is a singular (sexist) meaning of all trans body modification, and to buy into what conservative medical sources say these modifications mean, rather than listening to trans people describing the resistant gender-fucking space-opening practices we engage with our bodies and words, is to participate in the silencing of resistance that serves capitalism, gender rigidity and sexism.

This process of foreclosing occurs all the time between activists in various ways, where we tell one another that whatever effort we're making is predetermined to mean something else, often failing to realize that our rigid viewpoint serves to squelch the reshaping and rewriting of meanings that we're purportedly fighting for. So a part of this fashioning we're doing needs to be about diversifying the set of aesthetic practices we're open to seeing, and promoting a possibility of us all looking very very different from one another while we fight together for a new world. I want to be disturbed by what you're wearing, I want to be shocked and undone and delighted by what you're doing and how you're living. And I don't want anyone to be afraid to put on their look, their body, their clothes anymore. Resistance is what is sexy, it's what looks good and is hard to look at and what sometimes requires explanation. Why would we want to do things that don't require explanation, that are obvious, impervious to critique because no one even notices we're doing them?

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